

SHERW^{PAW}D BARKS

DOG TRAINING AND DAYCARE

It's important to understand that leash reactivity is not aggression and doesn't mean you have an aggressive dog. Leash reactivity is caused by barrier frustration, where a dog is being held back by a tight leash and is unable to use their natural behavior to move away, or get closer. When dogs become frustrated or overly excited, they exhibit behaviors like whining, barking, snapping, jumping, pulling, biting at the leash and jumping at their owners. A reactive dog is a dog that is internally struggling, either fearfully exhibiting space creating behaviors or becoming over aroused at the sight of another dog (excitement).

Understanding WHY?

The three R's

1. Reduction = Anxiety
2. Restriction = Frustration
3. Restraining = Arousal

Reduction: Being on leash means the dog has reduced opportunities to implement coping mechanisms. Coping mechanisms are a set of behaviors dogs use when stressed. Simply put, fight or flight. Opportunities for this are reduced on leash and less problematic coping mechanisms like,

- Fleeing
- Hiding
- Seeking out owner
- Lip licking, etc

Are ineffective in making the trigger disappear. The dog must then get creative after their typical responses do not work. You will now witness,

- Lunging
- Barking
- Rearing on back legs
- Redirecting onto the owner or other family dogs
- Biting/tugging on the leash

Restriction: The dog does not have access to the things they wish to access. The more arousing the things are, the more problematic this can become. This results in frustration, which can be presented as,

- Barking and lunging at the sight of another dog
- Can develop a negative association – a dog who liked other dogs, now does not
- Can result in redirecting and other inappropriate behaviors

Restriction and reduction are typically closely related and dogs will fall victim to both. Dog-dog aggression is typically a consequence of over arousal, exuberance, excitement and subsequent frustration.

Restraint: Tension on the leash. Compare a dog pulling ahead with an owner yelling 'heel!', 'stop!', 'come!' from behind to a dog being held back for a restrained recall in flyball or agility. Restraints are used in dog training to build arousal but that's the last thing we want when presented with a trigger of fear or frustration. This is exactly what happens when dogs pull on the leash when they see a trigger. This restraint can be the result of the owner too, suddenly tightening the leash when they see the trigger. If the owner feels the need to tighten the leash because they're worried about how the dog will react, it means they should not be in that situation in the first place.

Your Dog's Emotional Threshold:

Threshold refers to the distance your dog can notice a trigger (dogs, cats, rabbits, leaves, cars, bikes, etc) and be alert to it, but not upset by it. Being upset means they cross from one emotional state to another. From calm to reactive.

Similar to a protective bubble, any distraction on the outside of that bubble is ok and the dog behaves in a way that is relatively stress free. Any distraction on the inside of that bubble is too close and a concern for your dog.

The distance from the trigger is different for every dog and every trigger. It may be 10 feet for some dogs and 100 feet for others. The distance varies based on your dog's past experiences. Threshold can also be duration, the amount of time your dog is exposed to the trigger. Perhaps 10 feet is no big deal, but standing and chatting for 10 minutes sets your dog over the edge.

Going over threshold isn't always lunging and barking, it can also be;

- **Overexcitement** – mouthing, jumping, rolling, barking

Being distracted to the point the dog can no longer hear you or take treats

- **Shutting down or freezing**

- **'Zoomies'** – running away from you in a frantic manner.
- **Inability to take a treat**

Trigger Stacking

Stressor after stressor are building on top of one another until they suddenly collapse and the dog reacts. Walks can build one stressor onto another until the dog finally explodes into lunging and barking.

Think about;

- **Proximity** – How close is the trigger?
- **Intensity** – How is the other dog reacting? How fast is the bike going?
- **Hunger, thirst, exhaustion** – Will cause the dog's threshold to be lower

How to stop the three R's of Reactivity?

5 Steps:

1. Understand the signals – the most important step

Acknowledge and understand the signals your dog is giving you. Ensure your dog's coping strategies are effective by getting them out of the situation and away from their trigger at the first yawn, lip lick or pant. Ensuring these coping strategies are successful to your dog will solidify their effectiveness and ensure they're used in the future, avoiding response escalation and worsening of the association. You will then work on the trigger separately.

2. Create positive and calming associations generalized to being on leash

Ensure the dog understands that being on leash is a calm, positive experience.

3. Build value in things from a distance – **LAT Exercises (Look at Me)**

This avoids frustration from developing. Teaching the dog that, 'yes, that thing is in the distance might be positive and fun, but the reinforcement is over here.'

Pair things in the distance with reinforcement away from the things to work on building positive calm and distant associations. This also builds value in you! The handler! All in different places so you are more valuable no matter what environment you're in. Click & reward for dog looking at distraction, then to you for reinforcement.

4. Train Loose Leash Walking!

Training loose leash walking and couple it with reinforcement away from the trigger will stop all three R's at once. Your dog no longer has reduced coping mechanisms and you build the loose leash walking skill. Your dog will no longer be restricted as value shifts from things in the distance to you, the handler. Your dog will no longer

restrain itself as the value is in the loose leash rather than a tight leash! Click & reward the dog for releasing the tension on the leash on their own. Then, keep clicking and rewarding for the dog looking up at you, walking on a loose leash. Click and reward every few steps to start, then slowly increase the time in between each reward.

5. Train the safety net U-Turn!

The U-Turn is for moments when your dog finds itself breaking the loose leash walking due to the sight of a trigger and the leash goes tight. Your immediate response will be to make a U-Turn and reward for the dog coming back into you with a loose leash. This will become a reflexive response and a life saver! As you have just turned and gone the other way, it takes away the sight of the trigger, the opportunity for escalation, lunging, etc and replaces it with immediate orientation back to you.

TIPS

AVOID highly trafficked areas, purposely take your dog to a low distraction area. To a park or field that you are comfortable with.

TRIGGERS

- Create distance between the dog and the trigger.
- Once you've determined your triggers and the distance you can be at without going over your dog's threshold, work on LAT exercises and move closer and closer. As long as your dog is not reacting, you can keep moving closer. Don't move too close too fast, as to not push your dog over the edge without building the value in yourself first.

U-TURNS

Practice U-turns so you can get out of situations and avoid walking straight into another dog or trigger.

REMEMBER

Sometimes your dog will go over his threshold. That's ok! It's inevitable. This process takes time and you can't control every circumstance. If you are not going over threshold more than your dog is going over threshold – you're training and doing well!